

Livvy and I

1

“Shh. Livvy. I don’t want mom to know we’re in here.”

She doesn’t get it. She’s only six.

“Why do we have to be quiet? Where’s mom and dad at? Who are you calling?”

Her questions keep coming like a wind-up doll teetering across the floor towards me.

“Stop, Livvy. I’ll tell you in a minute.” The dark green landline phone feels heavy. It matches the pots and pans. I switch it to my other ear so she doesn’t notice my trembling hand. My eyes are darting back and forth, squinting to see through the slits in the metal folding door.

“Who are you calling?” She’s insistent.

“It’s grandma,” I hiss. “Everything’s fine, just be quiet.”

We’re sitting on a pink plastic crate that holds all my used-up, yard-sale purses full of fake monopoly money and mom’s old credit cards. She loosens her grip on my forearm and starts rummaging through the mess.

“Grandma?” I say. “Are you awake? Can you come get us?”

2

My friend, Sarah, points to the clear bottle in the way back of my fridge.

“What’s that?” she asks.

I look back at her, forehead furrowed. I’d never given the bottle a second glance; it blended into the ordinary contents of the shelves, hid itself in plain site in the back behind the 2% milk with the dark blue cap and my mom’s coffee creamer.

“I don’t know. My parent’s liquor.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

I tell her I haven’t and take a step back from the refrigerator door. The light is blinding.

Then there is orange juice and the contents of the bottle and lots of plastic glasses. There is her and I on our backs in my front yard and an opening up inside of me like the so many stars in the sky above us.

In a few hours, the half gallon of vodka is half gone and we are bent over, her in my bathtub and me in the toilet—throwing up and crying from laughter and loud and unaware that the world that we’ve left behind is still where we are. That we are still a part of it. I’m only 13, but that night it’s clear what I want for my life.

Livvy’s bedroom is attached to the bathroom. Our voices carry under the door and wake her up. I hear her calling me, but I can’t stop laughing.

“Sis? *Sis*?”

I look at Sarah. “Shhh!” I tell her. “We’re waking up Livvy!”

It’s too late.

Years later, Liv tells me she couldn’t move from under her covers; she was stuck like someone was holding her down there. She cried herself to sleep.

3

We're on our way to our friend's hotel party. It's the second one he's thrown that week. The room is dingy, but dirt cheap—just \$40 a night, just \$5 each. We just need a place to drink.

Livvy and I pile into my car, two cases of Keystone Light in the trunk and a bottle of cheap vodka at her feet. She probably won't drink much of it, if any, but our friend Jared gave her free ecstasy.

We have to stop at the gas station down the street for chasers for everyone on our way. "Wait here. I'll run in," I tell her. She nods her head.

When I come back out there is a pill in her hand. It is lilac and thick, triple-stacked, with a rose imprinted on it. I know what it is without asking.

"Let's split it," I tell her. Her face lights up with excitement from the passenger seat.

I've never done ecstasy, she knows that, but I'm already a few drinks in, so the usual apprehension is gone. Plus, I know that she loves it. I want to know why; I want to understand her again.

We're late and our friends won't stop calling our phones. Mostly they just want to know where the alcohol is, but we ignore them and sit in the parking lot of a gas station in the town square, snorting purple lines of MDMA off a grey dashboard. There is no worry of consequence, never a worry of consequence, hardly even a side-glance to the people pumping gas. When it's all gone, I slam the car into gear, smash down on the gas pedal, and we take off in reverse—up over a curb into a small shed behind us.

The noise of the impact is so loud that we think that the engine has dropped out of the front or that we've hit a person or something, or that maybe a fucking car went through the gas station's front window—and we laugh and we laugh and we laugh, until our stomachs hurt so bad that we're clutching them with both hands and our vision is hazy. I look at her with tears in my eyes.

"I haven't laughed that hard in so long."

"Me either." I fling the car into drive and we're gone, bumper left in the parking lot behind us.

4

I'm restless and the alcohol's run out.

"Let's make moves," I tell Livvy. She nods her head.

Jared follows us out the door, asking us where we're going. I tell him to get in.

I'm aware that I'm drunk and they are too, but everyone is used to it. They climb into my back seat easy, no questioning, as I slam the keys into the ignition and turn the music up as loud as I can bear it.

It's a straight shot from the party to Jared's parents' and I know it by heart, spending my entire summer sprawled out on his floor while him and Livvy sleep too close in the bed. He's

almost ten years older than her, but I can't say anything anymore. My advice is hollow and unasked for. I'm driving too fast, I vaguely recognize that, but it's like I'm a train with a broken brake lever in a dark tunnel and I can only see the light at the end. It never gets any closer. I'm slamming the pedal harder until it threatens to push right through the floor.

I hear Livvy screaming from the backseat, but I can't quite make out her words over the music. I glance back and she's in Jared's arms. The car swerves to the right. Another car beeps. I throw my head forward, focused again on the road in front of me.

"Sis, what the fuck are you doing?" Livvy is sobbing.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I stumble over the words.

"Sis, that was a fucking red light. Stop! Sis! Stop!"

I go through another one.

"Don't you see the red lights, Sis?" She's screaming.

"Shit, I'm sorry, guys. I'm sorry." My voice trails off. I don't look behind me again.

I am sorry. I'm sorry I don't see the lights at all, or the lines on the road, or the other cars switching lanes to avoid me. I'm sorry that all I see is the bottle sloshing at the foot of my passenger seat and that I just want them out so I can take another sip of it. Just one more sip.

5

My parents are in the front seat, silent except for the squeaking of my mom's lips as she smokes her Basic Menthol Lights. I'm puffing away at the pack she bought me for the special occasion. Livvy doesn't smoke yet.

I'm seventeen. A week before, I'd come home from school and told them about the call to Crisis Intervention my teacher made in the guidance office, and they'd claimed they had no idea that "things had gotten that bad." I know that they taste all the water mixed in with their vodka and gin, but don't have the courage to confront me. I try to get as honest as I can, but in the end I'm just disgusted and dying for a drink.

My teacher gets a bed set up at a facility two and a half hours away. I'm staying for thirty days. Sleep the night before I leave comes easy because I don't care where I go or what they do with me. I only worry about leaving Livvy.

She brings her bright blue iPod full of music for the trip and we each have one headphone in. Hers is the left earbud; mine is the right. The cord hangs in between us, two individual seats in the back of my mom's silver mini-van.

The music is blaring. We are trying to drown out all the noise in our heads. She puts on song after song that my friends and I listened to too loudly in my bedroom while she pretended to sleep. I never realized she'd heard any of it, but I watch her from the corner of my eye mouthing lyric after lyric.

Out the window there is nothing but fields and fields of dead grass and gravel and stones and I imagine what it would feel like under my feet without shoes on. I imagine how it would hurt and get stuck in my toes, and I'd just keep moving. Liv stares straight ahead. My tears won't

stop coming. I don't know if she's crying too, but she keeps one of my songs on repeat for so long the last hour of the drive melts into the sound.

The rehab comes into sight on our left. It is beige and square and there are girls outside playing basketball in a small court beside the parking lot. They're all in sweatpants and oversized hoodies, and I'm suddenly aware that I didn't pack any. They're not wearing make-up like I am. Most look like they haven't showered in a while. The ball bounces back and forth between them as they watch us pull in. A dying, yellow field to the left leads into a forest that looks like it goes on for miles and miles.

"Look honey, maybe you can start playing basketball again," my dad says.

6

Each day, our dad finds deep grooves pressed into the paint of all the white window sills in the dining room.

"Who did this?" he asks. I look at her and she snaps her head the other way. "Who's cutting into the window sills? Who's doing this, girls?"

Years before, my mother is knelt down in front of me, eye-level. I'm sitting on a dining room chair. It's tan and green, part of a table set that matches all the pasta jars in our kitchen. I smell her breath, like boiling wheat noodles—it's heat like the steam that comes out of her shiny green pots and pans.

"You don't lie. Do you understand?"

Each word seems to appear across her glassy eyes, glistening white, and I nod along with them—my head bouncing against each one like the little red ball from word to word to word of the lyrics of the sing-along movies we'd watch together in the living room. I want to grab them and keep them under my pillow so that I never forget.

"You never lie to your mother. Never. Do you understand me?"

I do understand. I did.

But Livvy doesn't. No one ever taught her that.

I never tell my dad I didn't do it. Liv never answers him, either.

One day we find her with a pair of scissors in her hand, pressing the blade into the edge. Her face is blank when she looks at us.

"Liv, I thought I told you guys to stop this. Now, why the hell would you cut into window. What in the hell, Livvy! Now, we just painted this!" He is irate and confused and he can't hide it like he usually does.

Livvy stares, her face twitching, and I wonder if only I see the smirk just behind her eyes.

"I didn't do anything."

7

My sister hears him screaming at me. We've been locked in my room for hours, a bottle of promethazine-codeine syrup nestled between us in the sheets like a newborn baby. I'd always stayed away from opiates, but he'd just got ahold of a prescription for his strep throat.

“Just try it, babe. I know you’ll like it.”

It doesn’t take too much convincing. Two swigs in and lying there with him on my mattress on the floor is like the heaven that I’d only heard of from my grandmother. The pain we’re in lies there comfortably with us, and we stroke it like a whining puppy in between sips of the sticky honey.

The eight-ounce bottle isn’t enough for all the shit we’re carrying. And that’s all that there is. He slams the bedroom door behind him and I run out, begging him to stay and sleep next to me, unable to even remember what had happened in the minutes before.

I hear Livvy’s door creak open. The sound is distinct. I’d spent years listening for it. I see her head peeking out before I hear her speak.

“Don’t fucking talk to her like that.” She’s calm and precise as she walks down the hallway into the dining room. “Who the fuck do you think you are? Get the fuck out of here.”

I’m frozen between him and her—hardly able to discern my hazy, doped-up perception from the reality of the situation. “You’re too young to fucking talk like that,” I yell. She isn’t pretending to sleep anymore.

He’s already halfway down the stairs. He rips open the front door without a word, slamming it on his way out. The upstairs rattles under our bare feet.

“Why, Livvy? You need to stay out of this.” Now there’s tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Then you get the fuck out, too,” she says, as she walks back into her room.

8

James is in the driver’s seat of the 2001 Chevy Cavalier. We are at least twenty-five shots deep between the three of us. Livvy is next to me in the back seat. The windows are down, the 3 AM breeze hitting our faces. And nothing matters—not that I might need stitches in my bleeding toes from the broken bottle I’d stepped on; not the car swerving, constantly switching lanes; not my boyfriend’s voicemail playing as I try to call him over and over. Not the gnawing ache in my gut that he might have actually done it this time.

I can’t tell Livvy that I think he’s dead yet. I want to, but I know it isn’t time for that. She’ll tell me I’m overthinking. I can hear it already. *Jeez, Sis, you’re too much. He’s fine! Can’t we just have a good night?* And I want her to be right.

James’ house is pitch black when we finally stumble in and down the steps to the basement. Livvy and I curl up on the loveseat together, all legs and arms entangled like mangled dragonfly wings. I fall asleep in minutes, remembering the rhythm of her breathing, of being young, when I would try to sleep in my own bed across the hall but no amount of pep talks or squeezing my eyes shut could comfort me like her chest rising and falling. I’d always make my way into her room, push her over towards the wall, and nestle in—and we’d fall asleep together, little baby blue birds in a nest dropping from branch to branch to branch.

Livvy and I are laying on the couch in the living room downstairs, head to feet. My mom's passed out on the pull-out loveseat in the corner, a buoy floating on the sea of blue and grey Keystone Light cans tucked beneath her. Her snoring's deafening, and we can't sleep. I want to talk to my sister, but I know that mom will get mad again. She told us to stop giggling.

I touch my foot to her arm. *Tap, tap.*

"That means hi," I whisper.

Tap, tap.

Tap, tap, tap.

"That one means I love you, Livvy."

Tap, tap, tap. Right back.

Tap.

"That one's goodnight."

I'm smiling in the dark, my head angled against the armrest. She has all the pillows, and my neck's aching, but I don't say anything.

"Are you comfortable?" I whisper.

I think she's smiling on her side, too.

When I go visit my mom, I see Liv's glass bong sitting out on her desk. I notice that my mother knocks each time she needs to walk in. I want to ask her why I wasn't afforded such a luxury when I lived here, why she doesn't say a damn thing to her.

"I've dealt with this shit long enough with your dad," she complains when she calls me. "It always smells like something's burning in here."

Something was burning. I was only six, lying in my grandma's giant water bed, Livvy and I on either side of her chest, when I learned the smell of wood burning was just my dad smoking bowl after bowl of marijuana in the basement.

Now, I notice Livvy's ritual. Three times a day, at least. Fluffy puffs of green like lint from an old sweater crammed into a glass-blown bowl. The *click* of a lighter. One smooth inhale, a sound like a plane lifting off of a runway into another skyline. A bubbling. An exhale like smooth jazz.

I just want her to talk to me, to tell me all the emotions that she's bottling up like the smoke in the translucent tube, but she says she doesn't want to.

"Sis, you're too intense sometimes. Seriously." And, "Sorry I just don't deal with things the fucking way you do, okay? Is that okay?" She's breaking down sobbing now, and I'm trying to figure out what I've said to set her off like this. She turns away from me and there's a gap between us the size of a lake filled with every bottle that I've drank and maybe all the beers my mom has too.

“Don’t you think I know that you’re better than me now, Sis? Don’t you think I know that? You don’t have to tell me that.”

My body shifts towards her. “I never said that, Livvy. You said that. I’d never say that.”

I don’t know what to do for her, so I just lay there on the bed, eyes fixed on her messy bun propped right below her left ear. I want to wrap her up in my arms or say something that works, but I know deep down in my bones that she’s on her own. I know nothing she’s said has led me to sobriety, know that her journey will be different.

And still, I want her to know that even when I was alone, she was the North Star guiding me. I want to tell her how I wish I could be her path home.

12

I’m standing against her open hips. The room is steady and thick like molasses, except for her slow, audible breath. A few grunts cut through the stillness. Every few seconds an “okay, Olivia, push.”

She’s not looking at any of us: her boyfriend’s beside her holding her hand, his mother and our mother are in the corner sucking back all their emotions. She’s looking straight ahead through her open legs. She doesn’t notice, but it’s her breath cradling my own—a meditation in trust. A meditation in anticipation. A meditation in uncertainty.

I’m not sure if she can do this. I wonder if my mom has the same thoughts too, but she’d never say that.

My tears start coming too soon and I hold them back before anyone notices. It feels like the biggest moment of my own life—like my baby’s having a baby, like I should be the only one standing beside her coaching her to push. Like no one else quite matters as much. In this moment like it always was: Livvy and I.

Our eyes meet just for a second. They look as sharp, as fierce as a bull in the ring, a red sheet waving and beckoning it. The determination that only a moment of readiness can create. Just a few more breathes now; I know it. Her strength beneath the surface is almost unnerving. I wonder if my mother feels it. I wonder if she sees what I’m seeing. Livvy’s resilience as palpable as her knee under my palm.

“You got it, Livvy. You got it.”

I know she doesn’t need me. She doesn’t need him, either. She’s all the strength I’ve ever wanted to find inside myself, there and then, manifested as if she’d always been like this. Each lecture I’d given her in the past suspended above us like the long-gone pot smoke and *poof*. Popped in the stale hospital air. Silly and meaningless.

“I knew it was only up to me,” Livvy tells me later.

I try to imagine the room melting away around her, a blurry mirage, the way that it did for me when I finally saw her daughter’s head come out into our world for the first time. The way all things changed in a moment—a whole earth-shattering, tectonic shift at 7:44 AM. She called her Lillyana; we called her the miracle baby. Not for the marvel of her entrance but for our

own experience of it. Together there, awake and present. Without additives or sedatives or resentments for a moment. Livvy and I and our mother. Sober now.

At one point she gives her daughter away to our mom, to her nana, to hold first. My dad hides in the corner with his camera and his goofy, gap-toothed grin, and I see tears behind his glossy eyes, too. He snaps pictures of my mom and my sister cooing over Lillyana, no booze on their breath, and smiles at me shyly as if to say, we'll get our turn too.

But I don't see him. I'm alone in the corner sitting on the arm of the chair. Watching, waiting, wondering. First about betrayal, then about redemption. I remind myself that all things follow a natural order, that our baby is taken care of. That my baby is taken care of too. That I have nothing to do with any of it. I remind myself there are plans grander than I could dream up, that the cords are cut. I'm no puppeteer. No magician. *Poof.*

My dad picks up his camera and captures me there—still crying silently, head hanging down, staring at my empty hands.

Badfish

The air outside was so still I heard the lock switch, permitting me to enter. *Click*. So loud it should have woken him. The door, too, groaned throughout the silent house. His roommate and his friend were asleep, out cold on the couches to the left of me. I tip-toed around them. But amidst the alpine ceilings, everything seemed to echo: each footstep down the hall; each short, hollow breath that escaped my chest. Only a few strides from the front door to his bedroom, but with each step my heart slid from its nestled spot between my ribs—sinking, sinking, sinking. To the writhing pit of my stomach, as if it was being wrung out like a towel. I don't know how I kept walking, the floorboards being like quicksand and all. Sinking, sinking, sinking. I already knew.

I knew when I woke up that morning. As I sat on the rocking chair in my living room, calling and calling again, listening to the clock *tick, tick* like an atom bomb behind me, I knew. His phone had been whispering his voicemail into my ear all night, but I drowned my intuitions with my own vices. I remember telling my sister I had to go check on him, that something was wrong, *I know something is wrong*. She didn't ask many questions, so my rehearsed lines went unused. I remember looking at the time, replaying our last conversation again in my head. It was slightly after noon, and I knew.

I remember jumping out of the chair. The thirty-five-minute drive. The countless times I'd driven those roads to him, but that day it felt like a never-ending, breaking-down carnival ride. I remember the ambulance that shot by with its sirens screaming, lights flashing at me, and the dread that welled up in the deepest part of my chest and dropped. Stuck. Cement. I remember slamming the pedal harder. I remember the empty driveway when I got there, and a slight sigh of relief... But I knew.

My bent, black bobby pin slipped out of my hand and landed in the threshold of his bedroom door. *Click*. The crunching of the lock being picked should have woken him. I hesitated for a second in the doorway, thought maybe my heavy heartbeat would wake him up. But it didn't. My mind reeled through the possibilities of places he could be, of friends or co-workers I could call, as I took a step onto the carpeted floor. *Where is he?*

I didn't see it at first, though it was right there in front of me on the top bunk of the bed that I knew so well; it was right there where we laid together, him cradling me like a thick, dirty blanket, inches from the end, even then. I even looked there, once, twice, three times... But

maybe, maybe it was my eyes, darting too frantically around his room, looking for his. Waiting for them to meet me. But they didn't.

'Lifeless' is not a strong enough word to describe the body when I finally saw it, because there was so much life in him and this body, there, looked as if it never had life in it at all—never once. 'Shock' could be used clinically, I'm sure, but it's not quite right either. 'Horror' might be closest—or 'terror,' or 'panic.' But truly, there is no single word to depict what I felt when I saw what I saw on the top bunk of the bed. No single word, no string of them even that fits the details, details that the brain is never supposed to know of. And if I could find the one word, I still don't think it would hold enough weight, make enough sense. Nothing did, except maybe *go, get out of there, leave.*

I should have shut them. Because after I saw what I saw on the top bunk of the bed, I would never live in the same world again. Because when my limbs went weak, when my heart actually splintered down the middle, there might have been an audible *crack*, like a rotting basement staircase. Or maybe that was my knees buckling. And I was never again to be who I was before that moment. It would follow me: into my sleep and my dreams, my sunrises, the clench of my teeth, each glance behind me or second of silence, even if it was brief, and the words of every line that I wrote.

Is he wearing a mask? I should have shut them. Because after I saw what I saw, time seemed to just stop and suspend itself over and over and over in that moment, even after it was gone and ended, even as the days went on.

The next few hours hardly exist, but I can try to piece together the madness. 1. I ran. I shook Andrew from his sleep on the couch, shouting *go look at Tyler, go look at Tyler, seriously Andrew, go.* He got up slowly, side-eyeing me in silence, almost like he knew, too. Walked to the room. 2. His friend woke up and stared at me, confused. Asked me what was happening. He looked scared, and I can almost see myself there, my hands foolishly covering a mouth that couldn't speak, pacing the hardwood floor with wide eyes and legs shaking so furiously they couldn't sit down or stand still. Fervid. A rabid animal. Reborn. 3. Andrew looked scared as he reappeared from the hallway. *Is he wearing a mask?* 4. One of us threw a tall, skinny kitchen island chair, one I can assure he sat in only hours before, but I swear I can't remember who, because we knew that he wasn't. 5. We scattered like panicked cockroaches when the lights

spring on. And minutes later, you could have found us, staring and stagnate, pale manikins piled in my car, looking straight ahead for an answer, or just a second of relief.

Is he wearing a mask? This sentence will never, ever escape my thoughts, the only full sentence that I remember comprehending and responding to that day. *No... He's not.* And the rest of the details of the afternoon do not matter: not the quick drive to find Andrew's mom who we passed only halfway down the street, not the call from the corded house phone to my parents, or to the cops, or the hustle of the boys moving the pot plants from the closet to the woods. Not the swing in the front yard that I sat and sobbed in, or the interrogations from person after person who didn't understand the sparkle in his eyes—I couldn't make them understand the sparkle in his eyes. Not the cars that never stopped pulling into the long, secluded driveway.

I saw none of it. I only saw him lying there. And I will not describe to you what a face looks like that has been blown apart by a bullet because I never want you to picture it. I have done a lot to stop picturing it myself.

Police and sheriffs and investigators and coroners marched in and out of his house, up and down the hallway, each round they made gazing at me with sad eyes to make sure I was still in there, somewhere. But I didn't see them. They clambered and carried and cleaned, but I only screamed: his name, and *no*, and *why*, and *please*, and *my baby*, wild and repeated like a jammed up jukebox. I sat, like a frozen silhouette in a cameo on the couch in that house, and trembled, shook, horrified that he was going to walk down the hallway towards me at any moment with his face like it was—mangled and distorted like a bad accident, like a freak show reveal, like a night terror that my childish mind never could have conjured. I saw it happen, over and over and over behind the obscurity of the cloth of a tan throw pillow stuffed over my eyes.

And I don't know if it was hours or half hours or days or minutes that I remained on that couch, but eventually, they forced me up and outside. Eventually, they made me answer their questions. Eventually, in the skintight front seat of a police car with black eyes boring down on me, they pried until I revealed his secrets. I told them he'd never forgive me. I told them he trusted me. I told them I was the only one who knew. I told them they could take me, too.

I didn't believe he was gone until the coroner promised, promised, promised it to me.

For many months, his twisted, static face was all that I saw no matter how hard I shut my eyes. What was left of it. I couldn't stay in a dark room by myself for fear that he would be lurking in a corner ready to pounce and take me with him. I couldn't sleep without someone beside me to muffle my shrieks from the dreams. I refused to go into his emptied bedroom or look down his hallway or even walk outside unless it was daylight because I could always feel his presence just inches away, the hairs on my arms reaching out towards his ghost.

I was haunted. I tried to cherish our memories together, but they almost didn't subsist, like maybe they'd died, too, with the force of the shot. They felt like delusion, no longer valid or authentic. I was sure of nothing. There are, no doubt, others who find comfort in bearing the soul of someone lost within them, but his was too broken. I could not carry the weight. A steady pressing between my collarbones.

It was crushing me.

Wind-up dinosaurs, empty gift cards, an entire homemade hydroponics system. One of those disco balls that spin on its base, a tool set, a safe box locked with a missing key. A lot of black t-shirts, my favorite that I've lost since then, and a set of deranged mindsets were all that was left. We were still here. We were forced to clean up the mess. I heard his brains were on the walls, but I never noticed.

So many days weeks months years, I found myself angry and obsessing: *Where is he? Or What train was barreling down the tracks in his mind?* Tunnel vision. Soaring towards the light. My mind got stuck like the needle of a record scratching over the same question after question that I recognized would never be answered. *Was I the last person he thought of? Who else was in there? Does he regret it? He regrets it; I know he regrets it.* The heaviest: *How dare he? How dare he leave me here with this?*

Some days, I sat and screamed like I did that never-ending afternoon on the couch in the living room. Some mornings, I woke up wondering where I was instead of in the top bunk of that bed, next to him—a half-awake-half-nightmare state, my body shaking in an attempt to release the finding all over again. And again and again. Some afternoons, I blared the CD that he made for me at full volume, and pretended he was singing Tom Petty or “Jailhouse” in the passenger seat like he used to. Some days, I actually heard him, and it was just as soft and sweet. I don't know which was worse.

There is a quote by Sigmund Freud that his best friend read aloud at his funeral. He says: “We find a place for what we lose.” He says, “Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable, and will never find a substitute.” He said, “No matter what may fill the gap, even if it will be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else.”

The quote ripped through the stillness of the room and burned itself, word for word, into my memory. I walked up to the podium after Zack with a small slip of paper and mumbled a mess of stammers to people that would never comprehend the mass of what they’d just heard before me. ‘Tyler would tell me he thought he was nothing,’ I spoke to them. And then something to the effect of: ‘if only he could see this, now.’ It was useless; I had no words for anything. But that quote, I could have written those words, should have written *those* words. Because we do find a place for what we lose. The inconsolable hole—we seek and seek and seek to fill it. We’re relentless. We know that it will never be the same, and yet, we persistent. And yet, we fill the gap. For better or worse, we do.

I never estimated \$1,500 dollars squandered on drugs after him and I broke up and an infestation of depression that would replace any solace he’d ever had within himself, any we’d ever found, if any had ever existed. I never anticipated that when I began to come back around three short months later, I would find powdered lines and needles buried in envelopes in the crevices of the bedroom like a goddamn hidden picture game. I never knew what to do with the worn and beaten presence that was once warm and protecting of me in all my own insanity. What to do with the slap when I called him out, the words that cut deeper than my hand against his cheek: *honey, you have no room to say anything*. And more than all of that, I never believed he would do it.

My memory just kept taking me to a time we sat on his bed, drunk and young and already so robbed of innocence, promising each other that if we ever did it, we’d do it together. Two guns, one pulling of the trigger. “*Icdanttark it anymrow I lobve you so mvuchim so sorfry*” was the last message he sent to me. I ignored it. That’s just the truth. I didn’t believe him. My mom told me once she thought that if I would have driven up there that night, like he wanted me to, to save him—he would have shot me, too. But he didn’t have to.

I felt it, anyway. Deep, in each one of my hollow bones, regret rooted and sprouted and grew. And I swore that I could feel him watering it; his uncertainty, his repentance, lingering. Vines tightening, wrapping, clinging on. Steadied.

I know, now, that you can spend days and nights hiding out underneath blankets, praying and pleading to a God you don't believe in, but the world won't stop. I know, now, that you can skip work or skip school, you can stop getting showers and stop eating meals and stop picking up phone calls, but the world won't stop. You can drink yourself half dying so that maybe you don't feel the weight of the dead, but the world will only snarl at you with half pity, half revulsion—it will not stop.

I know that your world, your world will stop, though. Your world will cease to spin on its axis, whichever way that it spins, and it will cease to have any colors or comforts or candor. And your world will look at all the other worlds with a hatred laced with *what if's* and *how will I go on's* and *why did this happen to me's*, and over and over and over, even after the instant has ended, it plays on—a steady, humming background rhythm. I used to hold my head in my hands and sob to anyone that would listen, an innocent attempt to comprehend: how could days just pass without him? How could the seasons keep shifting? How was my laugh warranted, or another's touch, or his favorite meal cooked and served without his fork and knife digging in? *He's gone*. But the world did not understand a minute of it.

I didn't either. Looking back, I'm not sure that I even believed that suicide really happened. I couldn't have, or I would have done more. It took a lot of years and a lot of uneasy effort to sort through the terrors that had taken over, to stare down my own guilt and regret manifesting in ways that certainly planned to take me, too. I swore every day that I would never get a reprieve, the guilt I felt only stuffed further down inside of me and packed in to make room between my ribs for all of his that was left over. I searched in every man with an ache in his eyes, every man who'd look back at me, and gripped them up. Grabbed and shook. Shouted, *I'll save you, I'll save you, I'll save you*. But the dead don't want saved. Don't need saved. They just wanted to take me. Their bell-shaped snuffers snapping out a light. *Whoosh*.

Maybe, death was the only light that he noticed in his room that night as he laid propped up on his elbows with a snow-capped straw shoved into his left nostril. Maybe, his lonely mind became preoccupied with the gun he knew was tucked into Andrew's dad's bedroom closet.

Maybe, he heard it whispering, whispering, whispering an answer. Maybe, he waited until his roommates left to go to the grocery store and ran upstairs like a ski-masked thief—though I always pictured him ascending, one foot in front of the other, slow and steady. Maybe, he sat there for awhile trying to maneuver the safety and decide where to aim. Maybe, he researched the quickest kill, the sure-fire way. That sounds like him. Or maybe, he already knew what to do. Maybe, the pain was easy, the shot the quick fix that the pills and the needles could no longer deliver, and maybe—I can only hope and plead and pray—he was happy with his decision and he floated away, smiling his half smile, no teeth, peaceful.

Or maybe, if he could, with one breath, he would blow the bullet back into the canister. Come back again. *Whoosh*. But it doesn't matter now. It really doesn't. I've walked through my own stream of bullets, arms finally raised in surrender, to become content with the understanding that I have today: I will never understand what happened that night there without me. I begged God for his redemption; I begged God for his resurrection. I begged God to take me, too. I found my knees eventually, hit them until they were splattered with my own blood, so that I could truly understand: we become so sad sometimes that we think we can't bear it. I can assure you, I understood that, then. I understand it sometimes, still.

I could write about all the ways that Tyler gave life to me while we were alive, together, but the memories that I save in the special cupboards of my brain never resonate as well on the page. Anyway, they are mine. What he has given me, all the ways that I have grown and keep growing, I know stems from the heartbreak; I know I owe so much of it to him. And so what can I be now but grateful for how he has changed me? Forever. No matter what's still left from the mess—there may always be splinters buried beneath my fingernails from clawing to the surface—I understand that it had to happen exactly the way that it did. Exactly like that.

It has shaped me. It continues: in my dreams and in his short, small giggle in the deep caverns of my mind and in the smile and sparkle of his eyes that I still see in strangers on the street.

An arrow that points into the stars, a mix tape of Sublime, a faded black and white ID card. A blasted, brand-new perception like a meteor shower, a note with three *I love you*'s back to back, a necklace. Rain every June, half a rack full of band tees that I'll forever rearrange in different closets as I move. A shoe box stacked with pictures held close to my beating heart. A gun with no bullets.

List of All the Things We Got Right

1. You were never shy with your smile—blazing white, upright vanilla snow cones.
2. I was a ghost on the days you looked through me, but my heart would still halt mid-clang like a dinner bell had given up, a mother aware that her kids had long run off.
3. Unlocked windows, an unhinged garage door, a key tucked into the flower bed—third Marigold over. I'd crawl in like a starving, stray street dog through your back porch.
4. "Maybe, you should talk to her."
5. I was the drywall that hugged the framing or the door mat smashed under muddy feet, but I never stopped believing.
6. Some evenings I shook like ice cubes in a warm glass of dark roast tea. You slurped down every last ounce of me.
7. I had you mapped out: your left eye was the capital. Right foot touched down in Texas.
8. Let's throw the anchors down to sea, disconnect them from the boat—manatees dancing around them like some totem pole ceremony.
9. Woke up to your thunder. I was lightening. Counted six seconds between our separate strikes. We were a long six miles away from the right timing.
10. Alone in the back seat of bus 23, faith didn't come to me in the form of God.
11. Even when the leaves blew off the barren branches in the autumn, they'd buoy in the same bay, get raked into the same pile.
12. Wildflowers never lay their roots, but mine still clung to you—a slow, sick decaying.
13. Our vines entangled, and the fruit either came out purple like the sweet ones or bitter like the green ones, but neither is that good for you, and we'd engulf them until we were bloated and blue.
14. All the lines on all my pages stank of decomposing plans.
15. If I would have kept all the tears I cried in mason jars, I could have refilled the ocean when the tides were low.
16. Anyway, we never really gave up.
17. I created a monster. Or a rag doll all stitched together and ripped apart. Frankenstein. Or sometimes Jekyll and sometimes Mr. Hyde.
18. "Please, just let him go. He's going."
19. Rose-shaped doilies floated atop the lake like deserted lily-pad habitats, coffee-stained from days awake trying to stuff the words into just the right shapes, but it was overflowing.
20. The sticky, saccharine syrup began to drip down your chin.
21. Hit the pavement and dashed into a nearby stream. Never seen since.
22. Picture frames ripped down and smashed to jagged pieces; we could still feel the pulse beating under floorboards from their fragments. Holes shaped like fists in the insulation caulked up with words we'd sworn off before, but they hung around our heads in swarms.
23. Placing model train carefully back on its track. Hitting start.
24. And we're off.
25. Again.
26. A shattered glass mosaic patched together with Elmer's glue and safety pins.
27. A rubber stamp slammed on every inch of my skin.
28. A chemical craving all balled up with sweating pits and clammy hands. A solitary confinement.
29. A crab's rotting, molted skeleton.
30. Sometimes paint spills all over the garage floor and you just never get around to cleaning it up.

Athena's Butterfly Effect

Your eyelashes brush my cheek,
just enough to know you'd understand
how important it is, sometimes, to
hear the same song repeated
over, over, and over again.

We've been running through this thing
over and over again. Like it's something
we have to catch; like we don't know
a butterfly suffocates caged in a net. Maybe,
put it in a jar, poke some holes in the lid.

Or maybe, we could snatch it up,
pierce its tiny little wings, stop its tiny little
heart. All sewing needles and safety pins.
We could crucify it. Hang it with the saints.
Take a match to the candles that never get lit.

When a ship sinks, everything we need
falls down after it. Bread crumbs and bed sheets,
pocket knives, cross hangings—descending,
descending. The song of the siren
luring you under, under, underneath me.

Enfolding. You say: hold everything loosely,
as your hands shake from the gripping. And
even if the sword fell from heaven itself
—would you grasp it the way you grasp me? Strong
and sure like the fingers up and down my vertebrate,

my bare chest. Back arches. Unfolded. Cracked open.
Or would you take one look at Neptune,
one more at the swirling sea, all dazzling and
dark and comforting, and jump right back in.
The party's for you, but you're missing.

Conchitas or Whatever They're Called

He is home and I am here and I am sorry and I promise this time. This time this time *este tiempo* is forever. *Para siempre*. Please, I beg.

• • •

I call out the ingredients and he obeys, handing me each one that I need from the pantry tucked in the corner, but he never looks into the bowl. I'm mixing mixing mixing. The spoon's getting away from me and the glassware is threatening to fly from the counter and orbit around my shoulder blades. I think maybe I am possessed by something. I taste the batter, I taste the batter, I taste the batter, but I can't figure out what's missing.

• • •

If anyone comes home from *Tejas*, they bring *conchas*. The round lumps of wispy dough are delivered tableside in a white paper bag and covered in sugar that melts down the back of your throat. There are brown ones like chocolate kisses and pink ones like his hungry lips, but I chose vanilla because it's milky like my own skin.

• • •

Conchas are sweet bread, *pan dulce*, with a sugar coating on top that resembles a shell, hence the English translation of their name. They are cheap, often enjoyed for breakfast with coffee or Mexican hot chocolate. *Conchas* are not a dessert, he says. They are like a tradition, an important staple in Latin American countries. They are comfort food.

• • •

The bread is initially exciting, satisfying, when his family brings them home for us. I haven't had one in a while. I grab greedily from the bowl and stuff a large bite in my mouth while his mom isn't looking. The white sugar falls all over my clothing and her precious, swept floor. I glance over at her. She smiles and I'm surprised.

• • •

I have never been on a plane before in my life. In fact, I've never even been inside an airport. But I buy the ticket for \$465 dollars for the plane that leaves at 7:15 the next morning. I calculate that I have approximately ten hours to call my job and tell them I won't be there for a week, call my parents and tell them I'm leaving, call a friend and tell them I need a ride to the airport, call him and tell him I'm coming. I pack my bags around 3:30 AM. I still don't know what I'm doing.

• • •

My *concha* is hard. It's stale. And I don't like it anymore, but I keep eating it anyway. I throw one third of it out the window as we drive and I don't think he notices, but I don't care if he does.

• • •

My grandma says, "We love him like our own family." His sister says, "You're my favorite *cuñada*" and I'm too nervous to ask for translation. His dad says, "*Nuestra casa es tu casa.*" I know he means it.

• • •

I am on the wrong loveseat. Everyone is trying to hide their shifty eyes behind warm, kind smiles, but really they are just whispering when I turn around and wondering when I arrived and who I am and who changed the plans.

• • •

Neither his mother (nor my mother) ever smiles at me. Neither his mother (nor my mother) has a job outside the home. Her job is to clean, to cook, to take care of the family. My mother's job is to slowly melt into the loveseat.

• • •

I arrive in his hometown, and I look around and I understand why he loves it here. I tell him, "We will move here one day." I tell him, "I'll drop out of school; let's do it now." I know I mean it. Everything feels rustic, brown, wild wild west. We drive down a straight, flat street like a floured-up baking sheet in the new, dusty, desert territory and there are *tiendas* enclosing us on all sides, in rows lined like an old school theater set. Their names are all Spanish, all ending in *-ería*, and I strive to make my tongue roll my *r*'s like the Mexicans do. *Rrrrrr*. My thoughts race along an untraveled tract; my hair bounces with each step.

• • •

I see four white people in one week's time and I wonder if they are even Caucasian or if the hot, Texas sun just hasn't settled in on their skin yet.

• • •

I observe my grandma as she's making her sugar cookies, perched on top of the wooden counter top, peering in the bowl like a button-eyed rag doll. They are almost all sugar—and she's

pouring in more and more and more. She has her electric mixer on the counter and I hear it twirl to life like a tiny ballerina on a music box, whirling the granulated stuff into a slippery consistency. She uses no recipe. Her hands don't look as frail and wrinkled as she whips. They are sure.

• • •

He pronounces the name of a blue, cardboard cutout storefront lying gently to our left side. His *rrrr* rolls down and off his tongue and I can't stop chasing it.

• • •

The bowl of freshly baked sugar cakes is attached to my right hand and my left one is mechanic and my mouth is permanently open upright into the sky like a baby bird begging to be fed. Fat hangs off my hips, but the cravings are relentless.

• • •

The *conchas* are not as good as they once were, way back when.

• • •

I am sitting on his couch waiting to leave. Spanish buzzes over my head and I want to swat at it. I'm not focused enough to interpret. I ask him if there are "*conchitas* or whatever they're called" and he laughs at me warmly and stands up to bring me one from on top of the microwave. I glare at them, sitting there in the same giant red Tupperware container. Sealed to keep the air out, trying to keep the fresh locked in. They always crumble anyway. I don't know why they don't keep pieces of white bread in the bowl like my grandma does to "keep them soft, Beth!"

• • •

The *conchas* are not her sugar cookies.

• • •

*Patty Cake, Patty Cake,
Baker's Man;
That I will Master,
As fast as I can;
Prick it and prick it,
And mark it with a B,
And there will be enough for Baby and me.*

• • •

His *abuelita* is dying on the bed beside us. I picture her making *tamales* in a kitchen all closed in like a cupboard or pounding *masa* on a tree stump in their patch of backyard all sweating and hurried. I see her selling crunchy packs of Cheetos and *galletas* from the back room of her garage, the neighborhood corner stop. I ask if she ever made *conchas*. She asks who the white girl is sitting over there and everyone laughs. I smile because I can't understand her slurred, sick Spanish accent.

• • •

I wonder who the white girl is sitting over there.

• • •

My eyes dart to his and I grab his arm like I'm expecting to lose it. "What are these cookies missing? What is it?" He asks me if she puts sugar in them. I glance over at my aging grandma.

• • •

My mother says, "No, don't give up. Don't be like me." And I feel her honesty drape around my shoulder blades like a heavy cloak or a rolled-out, under-cooked piece of dough, but I don't have the energy to stand there and hold it. *Don't be like me*, she says. *Don't give up like I did*. I look at her, standing at the sink scrubbing dishes and I want to crush them all up in piles of powdered sugar and fill the kitchen all the way to our knees. I shut the fridge.

• • •

I am sitting in the nursing home on the loveseat with *Tio* Manuel. He is speaking to me in Spanish and I am urging my brain to comprehend, but the Mexicans speak too quickly. He's the only one that believes that I'm there for the right reasons, the only one that believes that I understand his language. I picture him and me dancing. I picture stomping and scattered feet. I want to tell him that he doesn't know me.

• • •

I wake up in a room that does not feel like my own, but I am at my house (or his). I dodge from threshold to threshold, peeping through the cracks for watching eyes, hoping no one notices. I wonder if home is maybe just the skin that I'm in.

• • •

I do not belong anywhere I go anymore.

• • •

There is a *panadería* up the street and we stop there on our way back to the airport. Inside are three glowing glass cases full of *pan dulce* in its freshly-baked, un-suitcased form. The bakery is small and crowded and I order in Spanish and it feels like his kitchen. When I get back from Texas, I will lay a wrinkled, white bag of *conchas* on my parent's kitchen table and they'll try them with little enthusiasm and I'll wonder why I even thought to bring some home in the first place.

• • •

I'm off the airplane and into his life again. I have pictured each reunion. I know we will melt together quickly; I'm sugar on his ragged tongue and he's gobbled up in handfuls in one sitting. The curtain closes. The storefront set collapses and slaps against the wooden stage.

• • •

His grandma dies and I know he wishes that he were home.

• • •

I ask my taxi driver in worn-down Spanish how long before the *conchitas* in my suitcase dry up in this heat. But he just turns the *cumbia* up on the radio real loud, as if to avoid laughter at my absurdity.

• • •

They are just sweet bread.

• • •

I keep searching. Each stretch of land brings hope, but it never feels like a place I should unpack my clothes. I tell myself that I'll know when I know, but I'm starting to wonder. The only thing I'm really sure of is that he's all the home I've ever understood.

• • •

I am sitting in his kitchen dipping a soft, fresh *concha* into a cup of *Nescafé*. His mother is running a rag over the same spots on the counter. She is making things clean. My mother is in her pajamas or her track suit at home on the loveseat. She is not in love with anything.

• • •

I lock myself in my room and wonder what it all means. The grape vines that wrapped around the crisscrossed wicker walls of our deck were gone. The apple tree. The peach tree. The pear tree. Gone. The green ivory that snaked the mailbox post. Gone. And the family that lived there, you and me, we were gone, too.